

\eg\vonnegut
8 December 1994

(7AM: morning after American University panel on the Enola Gay controversy)

Just awoke from a dream, in which I was telling...Janaki, I think...about Vonnegutt's notion in Slaughterhouse Five of events in time being reversible and unchangeable, traversable, potentially viewable in two directions like a mountain ridge or a range of mountains...his trick of describing someone in a situation and then at once briefly recounting what was to happen to them in the future.

The effect, I said, was to give the reader a sense of poignancy, a double vision: the person in the given situation (with whom he (I) could identify easily enough, with its apparent complexities and uncertainties and certainties and dangers and choices, and at the same time, that person on a path as it was actually going to occur... "In a few moments, this will happen; he will do this...again, again...later he will..." so that the reader is invited to experience the feelings of someone in a situation who can foresee the future in the same way one remembers the past, who can compare the experience of the present with the reality of the future, look critically at the fears and ambitions and beliefs and uncertainties and the sense of choice and the supposed considerations that affect what one supposes to be choice...

and feel regret for the future, nostalgia for the future, guilt, sin, evil, shame (or admiration, appreciation) for what one is going to do in the future, along the path one is travelling today...

Why should such feelings always be retrospective? After all, without living in Trafalmore, one has a past to project--with a good deal of repetition in it already--and one has other people's experience, one is not without ability to forecast one's own future actions, both in the immediate situation and in the more distant reaches, or surely, some possible actions...

Why not feel guilt for some of those--or for the possibility of them, the "real potentiality"--right now? (When it might do some good! If it is possible to change! Or at least: to act as if it were possible to change! Like Scrooge!

Aha: the same notion, in Dickens, as Vonnegutt. Scrooge has a vision of the future--and of the present, out-of-body--just like a dream of the past. But unlike Billy Pilgrim, he is able to "act on it" (to have a sense of acting on it, otherwise than he would have done without this vision which is "given" to him) just as he might have by a re-visioning of the past, a memory, a "lesson."

Dickens implies: the future--if one allows oneself to look at it, or is given such a vision by a still-wandering ghost from the

past condemned to drag its sins from life behind it--has lessons to impart just like the past. It is a more optimistic notion than Vonnegutt's (who implies that the sense of choice is always illusory, that what happens is what was going to happen: So it goes).

Likewise, says Dickens, if we could look at the present as we look at the past--like an observer, like our friends in their more objective moments--seeing what is really happening, what identities and relationships really are, stripped of comforting, convenient blindnesses and preoccupations and beliefs--we could learn from it, the way we sometimes learn from the past. Then we would see the future, too: or at least, a possible future; "unless we changed, and changed the story."

"Except, what we wouldn't see"--Dickens doesn't say this, Vonnegutt might--was how everything would be changed by the accidents and the earthquakes that are wholly undetermined by these personalities, whose timing and character is wholly unforeseeable, and which give the present and the past--and the future--a contingency and a "real" uncertainty that is greater and different from anything the person generally experiences, and which puts his "choices" and power to affect his circumstances in an ironic perspective...

For instance, for the people of Dresden, the firebombing. Or for the people of Tokyo, of Hiroshima. (The latter thought they were being spared, they didn't know for what: like the humans in The War of the Worlds, who were actually being cared for to be slaughtered, eaten...

Another part of my dream this morning. I am saying to Janaki that some people who worked for me last summer apparently felt they had been underpaid; but why hadn't they mentioned it at the time? Why hadn't they left (instead of telling this to others, later)? "It's a competitive market," I said; "if I was paying less than the market rate, they go elsewhere."

Janaki says to me: "I have a feeling that you have come to accept the world as it is, more than before": i.e., with comfort, equanimity.

I tell her: "Do you know what I see when I look at the world...the world of buildings (around us) and people? I see meat. Food. Waiting to be devoured."

Another moment in the dream: I am commenting on meat-eating. "You think, as you eat meat, that it is the body of a stag that was leaping through the bright air, in a forest with flowers on the ground, expressing its delight, when it was caught by an arrow, its destiny...but that is not the way it was..." And I prepare to tell about the actual lives of chickens and turkeys, pumped full of hormones and tranquilizers, living in chicken-size tiger cages, with their beaks and claws cut off to keep them from injuring each

other and themselves in their madness...

I tell her about Vonnegut's notion of time and personal history, and the sense it gives the reader. I say it would be interesting to write that way--except that it would seem an obvious imitation of Vonnegut--about one's own life, and others'...

"as if your future lay before you as your shadow lies behind you..."

"or (as I thought, still in the dream) as your shadow rises to meet you, in evening." (Or something different from either of these: fear in a handful of dust)."

I wake, thinking: The anniversary of Dresden is coming up. I was approached last night at the symposium on Hiroshima and the Enola Gay by a Chinese who wants to vigil at the Japanese Consulate to commemorate the 57th anniversary of the Rape of Nanjing; "every year they remember these two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they have never apologized for Nanjing."

There is a picture of Nanjing in the latest Smithsonian exhibit. Is there one of Tokyo? Of Dresden? The exhibit could be: an account of the path of slaughters traversed by the participants in World War II, inspiring each other, depraving each other (till, 50 years later, Congressman Peter Blute could say, last night, "To think that one could be told that this unambiguously moral act (Hiroshima) could be seen as something wrong...!") (This has the ring of Himmler's observation to the SS generals in 1943). So it's come to this, it came to this...and wasn't it a long way down. Wasn't it a strange way down?

I can call Neufeld, and Crouch (one of them called Bird last night and told him, "We're all rooting for you"). And ask them: what can really be done to change this? What could be done to make something out of this? What lesson is really to be drawn?

Likewise, ask Hershberg, and Herken: both of them associated with the Smithsonian. As is Lanouette, through Civilization (get his transcript).

Talk to Vonnegut. What will he do for the anniversary? (He wrote the only novel about Hiroshima: Cat's Cradle). Call Ringler: this should be the culmination of his whole preoccupation with Dresden: course, slides, music (Shostokovich...)

Markusen:

Lifton; Mitchell

Sherwin: AHA. Call AHA board (Anna Nelson gave name)

Auschwitz and Hiroshima

Herken: relate to Smithsonian on History of Strategic Bombing

Rotblat, and MP alumni (Morrison: educate! Roth! Gibson!
change someone's mind! Is that possible? Hatfield?)

Tokyo anniversary; bombing of Berlin anniversary (last night,
a woman who lived in Berlin till late 44; another, just back from
Serbia, who had been bombed in Genoa by 400 American bombers).

History of massacre: see future of Bosnia, Rwanda, (where to
predict?)

Aspire to a discussion from which minds would be changed--one
or more or all participants would learn something, some new
uncertainties, some new angles, new hypotheses, data. Start from
assumption that each was open to this...

(the dots seem helpful; what do they mean? What is their function?
Ask Caen.)